

Should You Pay Your Volunteers?

A Voice from the Front

A young volunteer shares his opinions on a hotly debated controversy.

By Josh Seides

As a high school student who has volunteered for years, I've often heard nonprofit leaders debating whether they ought to pay their volunteers "a little something." While people on both sides of the argument have logic behind their decisions, I have strong feelings about the issue of payment for volunteerism. Let's take a quick look at the two positions and what they might mean for your organization.

Why You Might Want to Pay Your Volunteers

"We need money for gas and day-to-day expenses." That's the defense many volunteers throw up for why they should get paid. Some nonprofit executives may be tempted to give in to this seemingly pragmatic assertion. Many feel that a small stipend to defray the volunteer's expenses is reasonable and fair.

Why You Might Keep Volunteering Free

Imagine a typical high school student, sitting restless in the summer looking for something fulfilling to do. And now think about what would happen if your organization offered opportunities for them to volunteer and get paid at the same time. Every student in the world would arrive at your door, wanting to take advantage of this opportunity.

In turn, this scenario would translate into poor service for your organization. If a myriad of students signed up to volunteer just for the "easy money," chances are most of them wouldn't be truly passionate about serving the community. This would ultimately impact your organization, as these passionless volunteers would set the tone for the quality and commitment of your organization as a whole.

You may argue that you're not planning to be that lavish. You only want to provide a little spending money and help volunteers pay for their gas. But, innocent as this seems, the results may be the opposite of what you intend.

Why You Must Keep Motivation in Mind

Consider the reasons people volunteer – belief in the organization's mission, desire to serve, the satisfaction of mastering a challenge, the wish to be seen as (and to feel like) a good person. Money isn't part of the equation and will, in fact, muddy the entire purpose.

Once you give volunteers any sort of stipend, they can easily grow dissatisfied and resentful, because the amount you give them won't truly compensate them for all their hard work. The money will actually demotivate them, as Stephen Rafe notes in "Motivating Volunteers? Forget the Carrots and Sticks" (*Nonprofit World*, Vol. 31, No. 6, www.NonprofitWorld.org). Once volunteers lose their passion, they may start cutting corners and doing poor work.

You must be especially careful in the case of volunteers affiliated with service programs (like Beta Club service hours for high school students and corporate service programs for adults). From personal experience with various high school service clubs, I can tell you that most student programs are hesitant to partner with organizations that pay their volunteers. The same is true of companies that encourage their employees to volunteer. They want to make sure the volunteers are focused on making a difference in the community, not on augmenting their bank accounts.

And we haven't even touched on the legal risks of paying your volunteers – exposure to wage and hours claims for your organization and loss of protection under the Volunteer Protection Act for your volunteers, as Melanie Lockwood Herman points out in "Employee or Volunteer: What's the Difference?" (Nonprofit Risk Management Center, nonprofitrisk.org). The definition of "volunteer" is "grounded in the idea of service without contemplation of pay," she emphasizes, and that's a good fundamental to keep in mind.

I often hear community service extolled as the "pinnacle of the high school experience," and for me those words have proven true. Volunteering in a variety of nonprofit organizations has been life-changing for me. I've learned lessons and attitudes toward life that will stick with me forever. The exhilaration of helping others has led me to start my own nonprofit organization, which has provided me great satisfaction and helped many people. I am glad to say that I've never been paid for any of this work. If I hadn't given my time freely, it would not have meant nearly as much. **S**

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More on Volunteering

Learn more about recruiting and retaining the best volunteers with these resources (www.NonprofitWorld.org):

Managing Your Volunteers: 19 Ways to Work Wonders (Vol. 25, No. 6)

Keep Your Volunteers Happy with Dynamic Training (Vol. 31, No. 4)

Motivating Volunteers to Perform (Vol. 31, No. 5)

Where Are Your Volunteer Leaders? (Vol. 30, No. 6)

Free Webinar Recording for Members: Welcome, Adapt, Or Avoid? Responding to Trends in Volunteerism This webinar offers an overview of key trends and the issues they raise for volunteer engagement.